

Coming Soon: The Bicentennial of Poe's Birth

The bicentennial of Poe's birth, January 19, 2009, is fast approaching. So far, the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site (EDAL) is on track for mounting new exhibits and restoring the historic house in time for observances of this significant birthday. Besides the long-anticipated makeover of the site, EDAL and the Friends of Poe will provide an impressive roster of events and speakers for 2009.

In anticipation of 2009, EDAL has formed and/or renewed some vital partnerships. The Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia will kick off the celebration in October 2008 by prominently displaying highlights of the Gimbel Poe Collection. Jim De Walt, the new head of the Rare Book Department, plans to offer an event in October 2008 to mark the beginning of the four month period that all 17 of the department's bookcases will be devoted to Poe.

EDAL will participate in the International Poe Conference, which will be held in Philadelphia from October 8 through 11, 2009 at the Hyatt Hotel. The conference will attract hundreds of Poe scholars to the city, eager to share the latest thought and knowledge on Poe, his work and life.

The Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation will help to promote bicentennial events. The Walt Whitman House in Camden, New Jersey, recognizing the professional connection that Poe shared with Whitman, will assist in the observances.



One of the panels designed for new exhibits at the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site.

In addition to offering a roster of events in Philadelphia, EDAL will inform Friends of Poe members of what Poe museums in New York, Baltimore and Richmond have planned. EDAL staff look forward to hearing how other institutions intend to commemorate Poe. If you have any Poe Bicentennial news or would like to volunteer to cover events, please visit www.nps.gov/edal and click on "email" or call (215) 597-8780.

Surprise! (for Poe scholars): Poe Declared Bankruptcy

By Helen McKenna-Uff, Park Ranger

Thanks to Poe Friend Herb Moscovitz for sending word of an article in the June 8 “Weekend” section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The article, “First-person History: Eyewitnesses to America’s Past” by Joseph A. Slobodzian, provides stunning news. Poe had been declared a bankrupt. Admittedly, this might not surprise most people, who are familiar with the image of Poe as the suffering artist. But for those who have spent years trying to know more thoroughly about the details of Poe’s life, the documents came as a huge surprise. The documents that Poe filed had been discovered in the National Archives two years ago, but the news hasn’t worked its way into Poe biographies yet. The shocked rangers at the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site raced to investigate the display at the National Constitution Center.

Poe’s financial woes beset him in his teens, when he signed IOU’s to be drawn on his foster father’s name, debts that John Allan wouldn’t honor. And Poe’s money problems continued to mount throughout years of bad timing, bad luck and occasional bad behavior. Bankruptcy would have been a tempting option for Poe throughout most of his adult life. It turns out, however, that the option for Poe to declare bankruptcy existed for only two years.

A quick glance at the history of U.S. bankruptcy law shows that Poe had a very brief window of opportunity to declare bankruptcy. The first bankruptcy act was repealed in 1803, the second bankruptcy law was enacted in 1841 and repealed in 1843. In a letter to James Herron dated June 1842 Poe wrote:

The renewed and hopeless illness of my wife, ill health on my own part, and pecuniary embarrassments, have nearly driven me to distraction. My only hope of relief is the “Bankrupt Act”, of which I shall avail myself as soon as possible.

Indeed, Poe applied for bankruptcy on December 19, 1842, dutifully listing to whom he was indebted, their addresses, the nature of debt and the amount. It’s a very illuminating document and provides a wealth of useful information. It verifies comments made by George Graham, owner of *Graham’s Magazine*, who employed Poe as editor. In an article dated 1850, Graham describes Poe as agonizing over unpaid debts and keeping meticulous records. In his 1854 essay, “The Genius and Characteristics of the Late Edgar Allan Poe”, Graham says of Poe:

“the sufferings caused by poverty to the sensitive, proud, educated gentleman are agonies indescribable, temptations irresistible; and Poe’s poverty was at times excessive, extending to the want of the mere necessities of life.”

In “Schedule A” of his bankruptcy filing, Poe lists William Galt as one of his creditors for the sum of \$20.00. William Galt, Poe’s foster father’s very wealthy uncle, had died in 1825 when Poe was 16 years old! Poe was 32 when he filed, so for at least half his life he fretted over a debt owed to a very wealthy (and dead) man’s estate.

Other creditors include 9 book dealers. Did Poe have to purchase all those books he reviewed? There is a debt for music lessons, which Poe felt his duty to provide his young wife. Another telling and tragic debt is for medical services in the amount of \$50, most likely incurred by Virginia’s recent diagnosis of tuberculosis.

Examination of the names on “Schedule A” of the bankruptcy form reveal many of Poe’s acquaintances in Richmond, where he spent most of his youth and where he began his

professional career. Included among those names is “Robert Stanard”, to whom Poe owed the then enormous sum of \$150. It was Stanard’s mother, Jane, with whom Poe fell in love as a teenager and for whom he wrote his masterpiece poem “To Helen”. The debt to Robert, along with others owed to creditors listed as living in Richmond

and Philadelphia, must have weighed heavily on the mind of the proud, ambitious Poe. There is much to be gleaned from Poe’s bankruptcy documents, concrete evidence of Poe’s financial destitution and desperation.

The documents, part of the exhibit “Eyewitness: American Originals from the National Archives” will be on display at the National Constitution Center until September 3rd, 2007.

Recent Friends Events

During Spring 2007 Friends of Poe members and staff from the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site (EDAL) enjoyed three fascinating events: a walking tour and two visits that featured opportunities to see rare and impressive collections. On March 23, Jim DeWalt, new head of the Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia, gave a splendid tour of the Gimbel-Poe Collection. Letters, in Poe’s hand, that EDAL Park Rangers had never seen before, were some of the highlights of the collection, which includes daguerreotypes of Poe, a miniature of Poe’s mother, and the stuffed raven “Grip” that belonged to Charles Dickens.

April 29, Park Ranger Steve Medeiros, led a walking tour for 16 Friends of Poe through the one-time publishing center of Philadelphia. Among other notable institutions, Friends got to see where *Burton’s*, *Graham’s* and *Godey’s* periodicals were published in the 1840’s. Steve’s tour will be offered as an activity for the International Poe Conference which will meet in Philadelphia in October of 2009.

On Saturday, June 9 the *Friends of Poe* had a special tour of the Walt Whitman House in Camden, N.J. Six



Friends of Poe, National Park Service Rangers and New Jersey State Park Rangers at Walt Whitman’s home in Camden, New Jersey.

members of the Friends and four park rangers who work at the Poe Site were able to join the tour. This special event was made possible by Whitman House manager, Dan Blake. Ranger Dick Dyer gave the tour. Dan brought out a number of fascinating archival materials to show the group. Both Dan and Dick worked at the Poe Site in the past so they were able to point out similarities and differences between the two poets and sites. The tour ended in the beautiful backyard garden.

Note: The next Friends of Poe event will take place at the Free Library on Thursday, July 19, at 7:00 pm with readings by Matthew Pearl and Louis Bayard of recent fiction books featuring Poe. We hope you will join us! (See events listings).

Updated Friends of Poe - 2007 Calendar of Events

Correction: “A Summer Evening in Poe’s Philadelphia”, an outdoor concert originally scheduled for July 12, has been postponed indefinitely.

Thursday July 19, 7pm Noted authors Matthew Pearl, of bestselling *The Poe Shadow* and Louis Bayard of thriller *The Pale Blue Eye* will appear at the Central Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia at 1901 Vine Street. The event is free. Call (215) 686-5322 or go to <http://www.library.phila.gov/> for more information.

October 2007 –

Thursday, October 25, 2007 Evening candlelight tours of the Poe House featuring Poe and his tales of horror! This sellout event has become a highlight of the season. Tours leave at 6:00, 6:30 and 7:00 PM. \$10.00 per person but free for members of the Friends of Poe. Reservations are required call 215-597-8780, www.nps.gov/inde.

Ongoing Looking for a little “terror of the soul”? The October film series at the Colonial Theatre of Phoenixville, PA (yes, the theater of “The Blob” fame) will focus on film versions of Poe’s stories. Admission is \$7.00 adult, \$6.00 Seniors & Students w/ID \$4 children). Showing Sundays at 2pm:

Oct 7 - The Black Cat (1934)
Oct 14 - The Raven (1935)
Oct 21 - The Fall of the House of Usher (1960)
tentative –looking for a 35mm print
Oct 28 - Masque of the Red Death (1964)
Movie Info Line: 610-917-0223 and Theatre Offices:
610-917-1228 227

Bridge Street, Phoenixville, PA 19460
website: www.thecolonialtheatre.com



Matthew Pearl
(Photo: Sigrid Estrada)



Louis Bayard
(Photo: D.A. Peterson)



The Colonial Theatre of Phoenixville (home of “The Blob”) is offering a series of Poe films in October.

Saturday, October 27, 2007 8pm
(doors open at 7:30) \$20. Don't miss this! The Glass Prism, from Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, PA, who became successful with their 1969 RCA album, "Poe Through The Glass Prism" and their hit single, "The Raven", will be performing live for the Friends of Poe at the German Society, in Philadelphia, PA. They were one of the originators of progressive concept-based rock, and have many loyal fans to this day. Vinyl and CD's will be available for purchase. Proceeds of this event will benefit the Friends of Poe. For tickets to the event call 800-836-1691 or 215-597-8780. Seating is limited so call now.



Glass Prism

January 2008 – Saturday, January 19, 2008- Celebrate Edgar Allan Poe's 199th birthday on the actual anniversary day! We will be featuring recordings by various famous performers of Poe's poems and stories. At 3:30 in the winter dusk, tour the house by candlelight. Free but reservations suggested 215-597-8780, www.nps.gov/inde.

We are planning for a wonderful celebration of Poe's Bicentennial in 2009.

Visit the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site on the web at www.nps.gov/edal.



Glass Prism

She Grew Up in Poe's Philadelphia Home, But what Really Scared Her Was Thomas Paine!

Over a decade ago Sheila Rhoades began to correspond with the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site (EDAL). Recently, Sheila notified staff that she was coming to Philadelphia and wanted to visit EDAL, which was the home where her parents raised her and operated the Gimbel Poe Museum. EDAL wanted to interview Sheila and she suggested, to get started right away, why not conduct the interview via email. Her subsequent visit to her former home was funny and poignant. Sheila could recall in great detail her childhood memories of the house, especially memories of her mother, who is long gone and loved giving tours of Poe's home.

(Note: The artifacts that were collected and displayed in Poe's home by Richard Gimbel, and curated by Sheila's father, were bequeathed to the Rare Book Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia. Sheila and her family lived in the part of the site where Poe's neighbors lived. The last tenants to live in the section where Poe himself lived moved out in 1926.)

Sheila Frayne Rhoades' Poe House Memories

with questions from EDAL staff

EDAL staff (E): What year did your family move into the house?

Sheila (S): My dad was hired as curator by Colonel Richard Gimbel in the 1930's. My dad taught public speaking at Villanova University. He married in 1936 and had 3 children – my 2 older brothers and me.

E: Did you accompany your mother on tours of the house?

S: No - although I once answered the door and took some people through by myself at a tender age – around 7 yrs I think (very dangerous to do today)



Sheila Frayne Rhoades at the door to Poe's kitchen, a room she visited many times when her parents ran the Gimbel Poe Museum.

E: Your mother has been remembered by so many visitors. Did anything she used to say on her tours seemed particularly impressive to you.

S: I'd sit sometimes on the staircase landing and listen to her. She always referred to Poe as "Eddy" – as if he was a part of her family. She stressed the point that he was NOT an alcoholic, for how could he write so legibly and so well if he were?

[Note: Alcohol frequently got Poe into trouble throughout most of his adult life, so he struggled to abstain from drinking, sometimes successfully,

sometimes no. We agree with Mrs. Frayne that when his writing was good, he probably wasn't drinking. Whether or not Poe was an alcoholic, we leave to experts to decide.]

E: Did you ever conduct tours yourself?

S: No, other than the episode when I was a child (see above). When I'd come in from school, my mom would tell visitors that I was a student doing "research".

E: What are your favorite memories/stories involving the Poe site?

S: I loved it when actors came to visit. They would be appearing on the local Mike Douglas show (then broadcast from Philadelphia.) Some that I recall are the English actor John Neville, (Rocky) Stallone, and Joan Rivers whose husband was named Edgar! My favorite was Vincent Price – he came when he had started doing those Poe horror films - He was so gracious and I treasure his letters.

E: Did you tend to do book reports, etc. about Poe?

S: No. Isn't that strange?

E: People often ask if the house is haunted.

S: I never saw a ghost, but I didn't like going into the cottage area by myself. I did have a funny feeling about that. I'd take kids on spooky walks through the house – one boy insisted on staying an hour alone in Poe's room with just a candle - and the rest of us crept up to the door to make tapping sounds. It's a wonder the kid didn't die of fright!

E: It seems that you like to write. Did you pursue Literature studies in college?

S: I loved English and History – all the arts (I have a BA from Villanova).

I've been writing freelance for 7 yrs now – for local newspapers and magazines in St. Louis. My niece in Tucson is a teacher and she especially loves teaching Poe – so she's carrying the torch for us. I'm known as "poelady" on the Internet.

E: Did your father advise Gimbel on what to acquire?

S: No, my dad didn't have that much influence on what Richard acquired. Richard had the finances and was quite a collector - not just Poe, but Thomas Paine - was another one of his fascinations - we had Paine's death mask in the house and I was scared of that!!!!



Sheila and Marlott Rhoades in the Reading Room of the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site

